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ABSTRACT

A pictorial interview with indirect questioning techniques was used to examine the effects of family structure on children's perceptions of parental roles. A total of 121 4-year-olds participated. Interviews focused on caregiving, companionship, and housekeeping, and compared families headed by single custodial mothers, single custodial fathers, and married parents. A Chi-square analysis of the data suggested that children's perceptions of parental roles were independent of family structure. Housekeeping and caregiving were viewed as parts of the mother's role by children in all three family structure groups. Children living with single parents tended to view companionship as part of a mother's role, while children living with married parents believed companionship was shared by both mother and father. Results recommend the childrearing practices of: (1) encouraging boys and girls to engage in all types of play activities; (2) providing nonsexist equipment, toys, and materials; (3) providing positive male role models by encouraging men to enter the field of early childhood education; and (4) providing support to both mothers and fathers as competent partners in the development of their children. (Author/RH)

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## ABSTRACT

"Through the Eyes of Children: A Comparative Study of Children's Perceptions of Parental Roles According to Three Types of Family Structures"

Ena M. Shelley, Judith E. Stroud, James C. Stroud

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of family stucture on children's perceptions of parental roles. One hundred twenty-one four year-olds comprised the research population. The topics of caregiving, companionship and housekeeping were researched through the use of the pictorial interview method. The three family stuctures that were compared were: 1) families headed by single custodial mothers; 2) families headed by single custodial fathers; and 3) families headed by married parents.

### Research Findings

A Chi-square analysis of the data suggested that children's perceptions of parental roles were independent of family structure. Housekeeping and caregiving were viewed as a mother's role by children in all three family structure groups. Children living with single parents tended to view companionship as a mother's role, while children living in married-parent families believed companionship was a role shared by both a mother and a father.

### Practice Implications and Further Research

The results of this study suggest practices that should: a) encourage boys and girls to engage in all types of play activities; b) provide nonsexist equipment, toys and materials; c) provide positive male role models by encouraging more men to enter the field of early childhood education; and d) provide support to both mothers and fathers as competent partners in the development of their children.

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In the era of "Leave it to Beaver" parental roles were clearly defined and adhered to in the majority of families. The role of the mother was to stay at home and attend to the duties of housekeeping, child rearing and companionship. The father was to provide the financial support for the family and assist in child rearing primarily as a disciplinarian. Today less than 7% of married-parents fall into these "traditional" roles (Maynard, 1985; National Commission on Working Women, 1987). The increased number of mothers in the labor force has expanded their role into the area of financial support. Subsequently, the father's role has had to change and expand to include the responsibilities of caregiving and housekeeping. According to a 1981 national time-use survey, today's married fathers are becoming more involved with their children and are completing 30% of family tasks (Levine, 1989).

The increased number of single parents in today's families has also made it necessary to redefine parental roles. The typical family of today is comprised of a single parent in the labor force with one to two children being cared for outside the home (Divine-Hawkins, 1981; Maynard, 1985). The current statistics for children under 6 years of age indicated that 2.41 million live with a single mother while 294,000 live with a single father (Waldrop, 1988). The absence of a spouse necessitates a multi-faceted and flexible parental role within the single-parent family structure. Quite probably the single-parent must be the financial provider, caregiver, housekeeper, companion and disciplinarian!

Have the changes described in American families affected how young children perceive parental roles? Are these perceptions dependent upon

the type of family structure? The purpose of this study was to investigate children's perceptions of parental roles with the intent to answer the following question: Do children living with married parents, children living with single custodial mothers, and children living with single custodial fathers have the same perceptions of parental housekeeping, caregiving, and companionship roles?

## Literature Review

Few researchers have investigated young children's perceptions of parental roles. One of the most recent studies in this area was published in 1981 by Franz and Mell. The researchers utilized a pictorial interview consisting of twenty indirect questions focusing on parental caregiving and companionship roles. The subject included forty preschool children living with married parents who were both employed outside the home. The two independent variables were social class and sex. For caregiving tasks, the analysis of variance revealed significant differences only for social class. While professional class children perceived both parents as caregivers, nonprofessional class children believed caregiving was a role appropriate for only one parent. For companionship activities, differences were significant for both social class and sex. Professional class children and boys were more likely to perceive both parents as companions.

Naturalistic observation of fantasy play was used by Matthews (1981) to reveal the parental role perceptions of 16 4-year-old children. The children were matched into eight same-sex pairs and were observed during 1-hour free play sessions for three consecutive days. "Portraits" of mothers and fathers were created by analyzing children's

behavior when they assumed a parental role. Results suggested boys viewed mothers as homebound and responsible for caregiving and housekeeping tasks. Boys perceived fathers as leaders with optional participation in housekeeping duties. Girls' role-taking behavior portrayed mothers as nurturant and highly competent in mandatory housekeeping activities. Fathers were also considered nurturant with optional household activities.

Landreth (1963) also investigated preschoolers' ideas about the sex appropriateness of selected parental caregiving and companionship roles. Effects of sex and social class were determined by analyzing the responses of 144 children elicited during a pictorial interview. Among professional class children, results indicated girls consistently perceived caregiving as a mother's role, while boys considered it appropriate for either parent to perform caregiving tasks. Similar sex differences were found between the companionship responses of nonprofessional class girls and nonprofessional class boys.

Children's perceptions of parents with respect to nurturance, punitiveness, source of fear, and competence were examined by Kagan and Lemkin (1960). A pictorial interview with direct and indirect questioning obtained responses from 67 children having a median age of 5.6 years. Data analyses indicated both girls and boys perceived fathers as "more fear arousing, more competent, and more punitive than mothers" (Kagan & Lemkin, 1960, p. 447). Mother, however, were considered more nurturant than fathers by all children. Additionally, when the responses of girls and boys were compared, significant differences suggested of girls and boys were compared, significant

differences suggested girls perceived fathers as more punitive, more nurturant, and less competent than did boys.

Finch (1955) conducted an earlier study of children's perceptions of parental roles. Participants in the study included 3- to 7-year-old children selected from 20 families headed by married parents. In each family, the father had a professional occupation and the mother was not employed outside the home. A pictorial interview consisting of 13 photographs of parental roles was used in the study. The children assigned each parental role to either a mother, a father, or both a mother and a father. Results indicated children tended to think more frequently of both parents, rather than either parent, as fulfilling caregiving and companionship roles. With few exceptions, housekeeping was perceived as a mother's role.

Collectively, the above studies comprise a small boy of research which gives insight into young children's views of parental roles. The present study not only updates the literature in this area, but also provides new knowledge by examining parental role perceptions within the context of differing family structures. Such information is valuable since children's perceptions of adult sex roles may ultimately affect their own behavior and developing sex-role identity (Matthews, 1981).

## Method

### Participants

The 121 4-year-old children (mean age = 4.46 years) who comprised the sample for this study were selected from eight child care centers located in two midwestern cities. The 69 girls and 52 boys were assigned to one of the three comparison groups dependent upon their

family structure. The number of children for each group were as follows: (a) 21 children from families headed by a single custodial father; (b) 50 children from families head by a single custodial mother; and (c) 50 children from families headed by married parents. Two controlled variables were family income and siblings of the children participating in the study. All of the parents were employed and earned incomes in a middle-class range of $18,999 to $31,999. None of the children had older siblings. This was to control the possibility of children assigning a parental role to a sibling who may either routinely or occasionally assume the role responsibility being examined in this study.

**Procedures**

A pictorial interview with indirect questioning techniques was used for data collection. This method was selected due to its effectiveness in previous studies of young children's perceptions of parental roles (Emmerich, 1959; Finch, 1955; Franz & Mell, 1981; Kagan & Lemkin, 1960; Landreth, 1963).

Each child was interviewed individually for approximately 10 minutes. Initially, the child was shown a line drawing consisting of three boxed insets depicting (a) a father's face, (b) a mother's face, and (c) both a father's and a mother's face. The interviewer pointed to each inset and simultaneously gave the following scripted explanation: "Look at these pictures. The picture in the red box shows only a father. The picture in the blue box shows only a mother. The picture in the green box shows both a father and a mother." Next, directives were given to assess the child's understanding of the drawings and to

practice the method of response for the interview: "Point to the picture that shows only a mother. Point to the picture that shows only a father." When the child was able to respond correctly to these instructions, the investigator proceeded with the pictorial interview. The initial drawing remained in view and was used as a response card throughout the entire interview session.

Twenty-four line drawings were presented individually to the child. Eight illustrations of housekeeping responsibilities were shown first, followed by eight drawings representing companionship activities and eight drawings depicting caregiving tasks. Each companionship and caregiving drawing showed a child (or children) in a situation that could include a parent, but no adult figure was illustrated. Although two of the caregiving drawings did include adult hands, no indication of the individual's sex was evident. Similarly, each housekeeping drawing portrayed a scene in which a specific task would take place, but neither a child nor an adult figure was represented.

An explanation, followed by an indirect question, was given for each drawing. For example, when the "going for a walk" drawing was presented, the interviewer said: "These children want to go for a walk. Who will go for a walk with the children?" The child assigned the role to either a father, a mother, or both a father and a mother by pointing to one of the three insets on the response card. The responses were recorded on a prepared form by a research assistant who accompanied the interviewer.

**Analysis**

The eight responses for each of the three categories (housekeeping, companionship, caregiving) of all 121 children were examined to determine if the category as a whole was perceived as a father's role (F), mother's role (M), or a shared role (FM). A crosstabulation of frequency data (categorical role assignment X family structure) was utilized to calculate a chi-square ($X^2$) test of independence at the .05 level of significance. This procedure was conducted to determine if children's perceptions of parental roles were dependent upon family structure.

**Results**

Although no statistically significant difference was found (see Tables 1-3), it is of importance to note specific percentages of interest within the three categories. For example, 64% of the children living with married parents assigned housekeeping tasks as the responsibility of the mother. This parallels the response to the item "washing clothes" where children from all three family structures assigned the task to the mother (64.46%). In sharp contrast to this is the finding that 19% of the children designated "mowing the lawn" as the mother's role while almost 62% viewed it as a father's role. Very "traditional" role assignments seemed to be evident for this category. (Table 4)

The category of companionship did not have as great of disparity as the ones noted in housekeeping. However, the perceptions of children living with single parents did tend to differ from those of the children

living with married parents. Forty percent of the children living with a single mother, and over 42% of those living with a single father, viewed companionship as the role of the mother. Companionship was seen as a shared role by 42% of the children living with married parents. The total group of children (N=121) believed that companionship items like "coloring/drawing" and "reading a book" were primarily the job of the mother (47.11% and 42.98% respectively). The only item in this particular category where fathers ranked almost as highly percentage wise with mothers was "going to a ballgame" (40.50%). Over 47% of all of the children assigned "going to a movie" as a shared activity of father and mother. (Table 5)

The final category of this study was the caregiving role. For each of the eight items the mother was consistently identified as having the primary role. Fifty percent and higher of all the children in this study viewed the mother as the one who would give a child a bath, zip a child's jacket, change a baby's diaper and respond to a crying baby (see Table 6). Very few tasks were designated by the children as a shared responsibility of the father and mother. The largest percentage for a shared caregiving task was taking a child to the doctor (32.23%). What is particularly intriguing in this particular category is that children living with single custodial fathers still assigned caregiving as a mother's role (47.62%).

In summary, although children's perceptions of parental roles was not dependent, overall, upon the type of family structure, strong indicators of "traditional" role assignments emerged as individual items were examined. The results suggest the need for continued research.

***Conclusions and Discussion***

The results from this study complement observations and research conducted previously by others. Michael Lamb concluded from his research studies that "Fathers are doing more than they were but they are still functioning primarily as people who 'help out.' We still have not seen a significant shift in the perception of just who holds the responsibility for the family." (Levine, 1989) Pleck also noted that although today's fathers are more involved with their children and family tasks, the shared responsibility is still far from being equal. (Levine, 1989)

The data from this study raises many questions for future study. For example, since children living with single custodial fathers predominantly designated caregiving as the role of the mother, what role models and experiences are influencing them? Are these children in settings where caregiving is done primarily by female teacher and/or relatives? Additional research is also needed on the effect(s) of television and other media upon role development and perceptions of children. Future research also should focus more attention upon the variables of type of child care setting, working and at-home parents, and length of time the child spends with his/her parents.

What beliefs and attitudes parents model for their children should also be investigated. Powell noted that "In recent years there has been a marked growth in research on parental belief systems which has demonstrated, among other things, that parents hold a variety of beliefs about children and parenting." (Powell, 1989)

This is an opportune time to pursue further extensive research into the area of children's perceptions of parental roles. Because of

changes within our society the "family" has been redefined and accordingly so have role assignments and responsibilities. By understanding in greater depth what children believe about parental roles and how these beliefs are formed, early childhood educators can better assist and support the child and his/her family.

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Table 1

Housekeeping Role Assignment by Family Structure Groups

| Family Structure | percent role assignment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | father | mother | shared |
| Single Father | 23.81 | 42.86 | 33.33 |
| Single Mother | 26.00 | 48.00 | 26.00 |
| Married | 6.00 | 64.00 | 30.00 |

$X^2(4)=8.430$, $p>.05$

Table 2

Companionship Role Assignment by Family Structure Groups

| Family Structure | percent role assignment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | father | mother | shared |
| Single Father | 28.57 | 42.86 | 28.57 |
| Single Mother | 26.00 | 40.00 | 34.00 |
| Married | 26.00 | 32.00 | 42.00 |

$X^2(4)=1.557$, $p>.05$

Table 3

Caregiving Role Assignment by Family Structure Groups

| Family Structure | percent role assignment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | father | mother | shared |
| Single Father | 38.10 | 47.62 | 14.29 |
| Single Mother | 18.00 | 56.00 | 26.00 |
| Married | 18.00 | 62.00 | 20.00 |

$X^2(4)=4.846$, $p>.05$

Table 4

Housekeeping Role Assignment by All Children

| Housekeeping Roles | percent role assignment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | father | mother | shared |
| cooking food inside | 22.31 | 47.11 | 30.58 |
| grilling food outside | 51.24 | 21.49 | 27.27 |
| vacuuming the carpet | 21.49 | 49.59 | 28.93 |
| mowing the lawn | 61.98 | 19.01 | 19.01 |
| washing dishes | 14.05 | 59.50 | 26.45 |
| taking out the trash | 48.76 | 27.27 | 23.97 |
| washing clothes | 17.36 | 64.46 | 18.18 |
| planting flowers outside | 27.27 | 51.24 | 21.49 |

Table 5

Companionship Role Assignment by All Children

| Companionship Roles | percent role assignment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | father | mother | shared |
| coloring/drawing | 28.10 | 47.11 | 24.79 |
| pushing child in swing | 31.40 | 42.15 | 26.45 |
| going to a movie | 28.10 | 24.79 | 47.11 |
| going to a ballgame | 40.50 | 30.58 | 28.93 |
| watching television | 26.45 | 40.50 | 33.06 |
| going for a walk | 30.58 | 29.75 | 39.67 |
| reading a book | 33.06 | 42.98 | 23.97 |
| shopping for clothes | 30.58 | 35.54 | 33.88 |

Table 6

Caregiving Role Assignment by All Children

| Caregiving Roles | percent role assignment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | father | mother | shared |
| zipping child's jacket | 31.40 | 50.41 | 18.18 |
| putting bandaid on knee | 30.58 | 49.59 | 19.83 |
| discipline for writing on wall | 28.93 | 44.63 | 26.45 |
| going to the doctor | 23.97 | 43.80 | 32.23 |
| giving child a bath | 28.10 | 51.24 | 20.66 |
| responding to crying baby | 23.14 | 50.41 | 26.45 |
| feeding a baby | 31.40 | 48.76 | 19.83 |
| changing a baby's diaper | 33.06 | 50.41 | 16.53 |